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LOCUSTS IN INDIA

ANNCR:

SWARMS OF DESERT LOCUSTS HAVE BEEN SIGHTED IN INDIA'S WESTERN STATE OF GUJARAT AND THE SIGHTINGS HAVE TRIGGERED THE COUNTRY'S NETWORK OF LOCUST-CONTROL OPERATIONS. FROM NEW DELHI, BARBARA PERRY SENDS THIS REPORT.

VOICE:

UNUSUAL WIND PATTERNS CROSSING THE ARABIAN SEA HAVE CARRIED LOCUST SWARMS INTO INDIA FOR THE FIRST TIME IN SIXTEEN YEARS. EARLY IN JUNE, THE FIRST SIGHTINGS OF DESERT LOCUSTS WERE REPORTED IN THE WESTERN STATE OF GUJARAT. WITHIN DAYS, SWARMS ENTERED THE NEIGHBORING STATE OF RAJASTHAN.

THE CENTRAL LOCUST CONTROL ORGANIZATION, BASED HERE IN NEW DELHI, CONTINUALLY MONITORS AREAS MOST SUSCEPTIBLE TO LOCUST INVASIONS. IT HAS NOW GONE INTO ACTION, COORDINATING PESTICIDES DUSTING AND SPRAYING OPERATIONS AND CLOSELY MONITORING LOCUST ACTIVITY. THE LOCUST-CONTROL DIRECTOR, DOCTOR X.M. BANARJEE, AFTER RETURNING TO NEW DELHI FROM AN INSPECTION TOUR OF GUJARAT, CALLED THE PRESENT SITUATION VERY FLUID. HE EXPLAINED THAT UNTIL THE IMMATURE INSECTS REACH THE EGG-LAYING STAGE, THERE IS LITTLE DANGER OF A FULL SCALE LOCUST THREAT.

LITTLE OR NO CROP DAMAGE HAS BEEN REPORTED, BECAUSE MOST FARMS ARE IN BETWEEN HARVESTS. THIS SITUATION WILL CHANGE WITH THE ONSET OF THE MONSOON SEASON, HOWEVER, SINCE LOCUSTS REQUIRE MOIST SOIL TO LAY THEIR EGGS. BUT WHILE THE WEATHER IN GUJARAT AND REJASTHAN HAS BEEN DRY, MONSOON RAINS ARE EXPECTED BEFORE THE FIRST OF JULY.

DOCTOR BANARJEE SAID HE IS N O T OVERLY CONCERNED AT THE MOMENT. INDIA HAS THE MANPOWER, MACHINERY AND PESTICIDES TO HANDLE THE SWARM SIGHTED SO FAR. BUT HE ADDED THAT IF THE INSECTS KEEP COMING IN FROM THE ARABIAN SEA, THE SITUATION WILL BECOME SERIOUS. THE REAL DANGER WOULD ARRIVE AFTER THE MONSOON WHEN CROPS ARE IN THE FIELDS. EARLY THIS MONTH, THE UNITED NATIONS FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION WARNED THAT FIFTY NATIONS WOULD BE INFESTED IF LOCUSTS IN WAR-TORN ETHIOPIA AND SOMALIA WERE N O T CONTROLLED.

LOCUST SWARMS ARE NOW FOLLOWING THE MONSOONS ACROSS THE ARABIAN PENINSULA. ACCORDING TO DOCTOR BANARJEE THE LOCUSTS WOULD NORMALLY TRAVEL TOWARD AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN. BUT WITHOUT ANY WARNING, THE LOCUSTS APPARENTLY CROSSED THE ARABIAN SEA IN AN UNUSUAL ROUTE TOWARD INDIA.

INDIA'S LAST LOCUST INVASION WAS IN NINETEEN FIFTY NINE AND LASTED FOR FOUR YEARS. THE CONTROL AND MONITORING SYSTEM SET UP IN NINETEEN THIRTY SIX TODAY OPERATES WITH A FULL COMPLEMENT OF PLANES, JEEPS, SPRAY EQUIPMENT, WIRELESS COMMUNICATION POSTS AND EVEN FLAME THROWERS. THE MONITORING SYSTEM ALSO EXCHANGES LOCUST-SIGHTING INFORMATION WITH NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES. INDIAN OFFICIALS, HOPING FOR ANOTHER BUMPER WHEAT CROP THIS YEAR, ARE WARY OF THE LOCUSTS. ACCORDING TO DOCTOR BANARJEE, THEY HAVE GOOD REASON TO BE. A SWARM COVERING ONE SQUARE MILE WILL CONTAIN ONE HUNDRED MILLION LOCUSTS. THAT MANY LOCUSTS WILL EAT THREE HUNDRED TONS OF FOOD PER DAY WHEREVER THE SWARM SETTLES.

WJL/RCS